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CIA Charges Agent-Author Violated Oath

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The CIA charged yesterday that a former spymaster violated his secrecy oath by publishing a book accusing the agency of bungling in the fall of Vietnam, but the Justice Department decided not to try to stop sale of the book.

The book, "Decent Interval," by Frank W. Snepp III, is now being distributed to bookstores by Random House without having been submitted to the CIA for review.

In a graphic description of the last two years before Saigon fell, the book says the CIA betrayed its agents, friends and collaborators by an evacuation from Vietnam in April 1975 that was inadequately prepared because senior officials had been deceived about Communist intentions.

An angry CIA statement said that "Mr. Snepp has violated his signed secrecy agreement and the specific promise made . . . to the director (of the CIA, Adm. Stansfield Turner), before witnesses, to submit his book for security clearance."

"THE DIRECTOR is therefore consulting with the attorney general to ascertain what legal steps might be appropriately taken under the circumstances," the statement said.

Sources at the CIA suggested that an effort might be made to get a legal injunction to halt distribution of the book. But a spokesman for the Justice Department said there would be no attempt to stop the book.

The spokesman said the department's civil division will study the situation over the weekend — during which time the book is expected by

Random House to go on sale in most of the country. The division will decide Monday whether to take legal action on the allegation that Snepp violated his oath.

The oath violation charge is "very touchy," a Justice official commented. "There isn't any criminality in violating the security agreement" in itself, although a violation could lead to criminal action, he explained.

WHILE THE Justice Department thus seemed hesitant about trying to prosecute on behalf of the CIA, sources close to the case suggested that the agency has a special reason for wanting to appear tough on this case.

The agency has been suffering from morale problems. It is now in the process of firing more than 800 persons from its spying operations. The sources thought senior agency officials might be worried about further awkward books from disgruntled former agents, and they therefore want to take stiff action against Snepp in hopes that it would have a deterrent effect on others.

An agency spokesman said that when Snepp went to work for the agency in 1968, he signed the standard secrecy agreement. It promised that he would "never divulge, publish or reveal by writing, word, conduct or otherwise any classified information, including CIA cover arrangements, to any unauthorized person without prior consent of the director of central intelligence or his representative."

Snepp wrote in his book that he decided not to "submit my manuscript to the agency for clearance and censorship" because the CIA was leaking self-serving versions of the last days of Vietnam. It had thus "forfeited the right to censor me in the name of security or national interest."

THE CIA STATEMENT denied any intention of censoring Snepp.

It said Turner met with Snepp at Snepp's request on May 17 "to discuss a request for information for a book Snepp planned to write about Vietnam." Snepp was reminded of his secrecy agreement and "his obligation to submit his book for security clearance . . . (but) it was emphasized that no censorship of facts or opinion was intended. . . ."

"Mr. Snepp agreed to provide the manuscript for review," the statement said, and Turner provided unclassified information that Snepp requested. The next thing Turner knew about the book was what he read in yesterday's newspapers, the statement said.